

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01

INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02

SS-15 USIA-06 COME-00 EB-08 LAB-04 SIL-01 DHA-02

/083 W

-----222128Z 041101 /73

R 221617Z MAR 77

FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6140

ZINFO RUFHRS/AMEMBASSY ALGIERS 3440

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 1947

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, PINS, TS

SUBJECT: ARREST OF BEN SALAH ASSOCIATES

REF: TUNIS 1879

1. ON EVENING OF MARCH 21, GOT RELEASED COMMUNIQUE ON ARREST OF BEN SALAH ASSOCIATES ENTITLED "DISCOVERY OF A POLITICAL MOVEMENT HOSTILE TO REGIME." GOT SAID THAT 23 PERSONS HAD BEEN ARRESTED FOR MEMBERSHIP IN THIS ORGANIZATION DIRECTED BY EX-MINISTER OF PLAN AHMED BEN SALAH. ARRESTS SPARKED BY DISTRIBUTION OF TRACTS HOSTILE TO REGIME AND SUBSEQUENT DISCOVERY OF ORGANIZATION SEEKING TO COMBAT REGIME BY ILLEGAL MEANS. COMMUNIQUE SAID THE 23 WOULD BE REFERRED TO THE STATE SECURITY COURT AND NAMED 12 OF THE ACCUSED. ALL INDIVIDUALS REPORTED IN REFTEL INCLUDED IN LIST.

2. GOT COMMUNIQUE WAS CARRIED ON MARCH 21 EVENING TV AND RADIO NEWS PROGRAMS AND IN MARCH 22 PRESS. MEDIA ALSO NOTED THAT PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA HAD RECEIVED PRIME
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MINISTER NOUIRA AND INTERIOR MINISTER BELKHODJA MARCH 21, INDICATING THAT THEY DISCUSSED THIS IMPORTANT POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT.

3. PUBLIC REACTION TO ARRESTS APPEARS TO BE GAINING MOMENTUM WITH ENGINEERS' UNION TAKING LEAD IN QUESTIONING THE LEGALITY OF THE GOVERNMENT'S RESTRICTING POLITICAL FREEDOM.

THE ENGINEERS'S STRIKE, CALLED DURING A PUBLIC MEETING ON MARCH 18, TO PROTEST ARREST OF ENGINEERS' UNION SECRETARY GENERAL MOHAMED BELHAJ AMOR, APPEARS TO HAVE PARALYZED MINUTOY OF AGRICULTURE (WHICH EMPLOYS ABOUT 50 PCNT OF TUNISIA'S ENGINEERS). TELEVISION TRANSMISSION WAS INTERRUPTED FOR TWO HOURS ON EVENING OF MARCH 21 BY STRIKE AND RTT RADIO TRANSMISSTION WAS INTERMITTENT MORNING OF MARCH 22. WE UNDERSTAND THAT ENGINEERS WHO DO NOT SYMPATHIZE WITH BEN SALAH POLICIES OR WITH HIS OBJECTIVE OF OVERTHROWING CURRENT REGIME ARE SUPPORTING STRIKE OUT OF SOLIDARITY WITH BELHAJ AMOR WHO THEY SAY WAS ONLY EXERCISING CONSTITUTIONALLY GUARANTEED POLITICAL LIBERTIES. "LIBERAL" OPPOSITION ELEMENTS AND RADICAL STUDENTS WILL ALSO PROBABLY SUPPORT BEN SALAHISTS AND USE THEIR ARREST AS OCCASION TO ASSERT DENIAL OF NORMAL POLITICAL FREEDOM IN TUNISIA.

4. GOT IS NORMALLY EXPEDITIOUS IN REFERRING CRIMINAL CASES TO STAE SECURITY COURTS AND TRIAL SHOULD BE HELD IN NEAR FUTURE. BEN SALAH ORGANIZATION IS LIKELY TO USE THIS TRIAL TO INTENSIFY ITS ANTI-GOT PROPAGANDA EFFORTS AMONG TUNISIANS IN EUROPE AND TO SEEK TO DISTRIBUTE MORE ANTI-GOT TRACTS IN TUNISIA.

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